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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN

BURGLARY, CRIME RATES

AND "FEAR OF CRIME" MEASURES

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in Psychology
at Massey University.

Kirsty M. Allan
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ABSTRACT

"Fear of crime" is an area that has attracted considerable research attention in recent decades. The primary aim of the present study was to examine the influence of crime-related predictors on perceptions and behaviours relevant to domestic burglary - a crime traditionally deemed to be of little importance.

The 153 subjects were selected on the basis of victimization status. Subjects were divided into three groups - victims of domestic burglary, indirect victims of domestic burglary and nonvictims. A severity index was developed to investigate the influence of burglaries of different severities. Subjects were also selected from three areas of Palmerston North, representative of high, medium and low burglary risk areas.

"Fear of crime" measures included responses to crime perceptions measures and protective actions engaged in. Crime perceptions measures included an individual's assessment of his/her perceived likelihood of future victimization and assessments of the base rate of burglary.

Results did not support the presence of victimization effects. There were no significant differences on any of the variables between victims, indirect victims and nonvictims, despite estimations tending in the expected directions. The definition of a victim used in the current study (up to one year post-burglary) may have been insensitive to the presence of victimization effects. Future research should address this issue. Despite no significant findings pertaining to the severity index this is also

an area identified as requiring further investigation.

The burglary rate of an area had no influence on one's assessment of personal vulnerability. However, respondents were aware of the relative "safety" (in terms of burglary rates) of their neighbourhoods and generally viewed their own neighbourhood as being "safer" than Palmerston North as a whole. Despite this realistic appraisal of relative burglary rates, estimates of burglary rates were far in excess of the official incidence of burglary. Future research should address why these estimates were so inflated and what are the implications of these findings.

Results about protective actions revealed that on the whole the public was ill-informed about options available to them, and that there was considerable variability in the number of protective actions undertaken. The results of the present study indicate that a neighbourhood level approach to crime prevention and information dissemination would be most appropriate.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|--------------|
| Abstract | ii |
| Acknowledgment | iv |
| Table of Contents | v |
| List of Tables | viii |
| | Page |
| <u>Chapter One: Introduction</u> | 1 |
| Definition of "Fear of Crime"..... | 1 |
| Personal and Property Crimes..... | 3 |
| <u>Chapter Two: Literature Review</u> | 5 |
| Victimization..... | 5 |
| Indirect Victimization..... | 7 |
| Perceptions of Risk..... | 10 |
| General and Personal Level Judgments..... | 12 |
| Victimization and Judgments..... | 13 |
| Nonvictims and Victimization Research..... | 16 |
| Victimization and Time..... | 16 |
| Burglary..... | 17 |
| The Incidence of Burglary..... | 18 |
| Destruction of Property..... | 21 |
| Neighbourhood Crime..... | 23 |
| Precautions against Victimization..... | 24 |

| | Page |
|---|-----------|
| Non Random Nature of Burglary..... | 29 |
| Demographic Variables..... | 30 |
| <u>Chapter Three: Research Hypotheses.....</u> | 32 |
| <u>Chapter Four: Methodology.....</u> | 36 |
| Subjects..... | 36 |
| Questionnaire..... | 40 |
| Group Status..... | 40 |
| Severity Index..... | 40 |
| Neighbourhood Crime..... | 41 |
| Perceived Risk Of Burglary..... | 41 |
| Protective Actions..... | 42 |
| Procedure..... | 43 |
| Pilot Testing..... | 43 |
| Subject Recruitment..... | 44 |
| Data Collection..... | 45 |
| <u>Chapter Five: Results.....</u> | 48 |
| Victimization Effects..... | 52 |
| Area of Residence Effects..... | 56 |
| Age Effects..... | 59 |
| Socio-Economic Status Effects..... | 63 |

| | Page |
|--|------|
| Gender Effects..... | 66 |
| Estimations of Burglary Rates..... | 66 |
| Perceived Likelihood..... | 68 |
| <u>Chapter Six: Discussion</u> | 69 |
| Research Questions and Hypotheses..... | 69 |
| Limitations of the Present Study..... | 78 |
| Policy Options..... | 81 |
| Suggestions for Future Research..... | 83 |
| <u>Appendices</u> | 85 |
| (I) Perception of Risk Questionnaire..... | 85 |
| (II) Development of the Severity Index..... | 90 |
| (III) Police Cover Letter..... | 91 |
| (IV) Feedback Letter to Research Participants..... | 92 |
| (V) First Request Letter to Respondents..... | 93 |
| (VI) Debriefing Letter to Mail-Respondents..... | 94 |
| (VII) Second Request Letter to Respondents..... | 95 |
| <u>References</u> | 96 |

LIST OF TABLES

| Table | | Page |
|-------|--|------|
| 1 | Subjects - Distribution by Area..... | 38 |
| 2 | Subjects - Distribution by Group Status..... | 39 |
| 3 | Descriptive Statistics - Estimated Percentage of Burglary Rates in each Area, by all Subjects..... | 48 |
| 4 | Descriptive Statistics - Rating of Perceived Likelihood of Future Victimization and Total Protective Actions Engaged in, by all Subjects..... | 49 |
| 5 | Percentage of Respondents engaging in each of the Protective Actions..... | 50 |
| 6 | Mean Percentage Estimates of Burglary Rates in each Area, by Victimization Status..... | 52 |
| 7 | Mean Rating of Likelihood of Future Victimization, by Victimization Status..... | 53 |
| 8 | Mean number of Protective Actions, by Victimization Status..... | 54 |
| 9 | Mean Likelihood of Future Victimization and Mean Total Protective Actions, by Severity of Burglary..... | 55 |
| 10 | Mean Percentage Estimates of Burglary Rates in each Area, by Area of Residence..... | 56 |
| 11 | Mean Rating of Likelihood of Future Victimization, by Area of Residence..... | 57 |
| 12 | Mean Number of Protective Actions, by Area of Residence..... | 58 |

| Table | | Page |
|-------|--|------|
| 13 | Mean Percentage Estimates of Burglary Rates in each Area, by Age of Respondents..... | 59 |
| 14 | Mean Rating of Likelihood of Future Victimization, by Age of Respondents..... | 60 |
| 15 | Mean Number of Protective Actions, by Age of Respondents..... | 61 |
| 16 | Percentage of Respondents in each Age Group who Practised the Following Protective Behaviours..... | 62 |
| 17 | Mean Percentage Estimates of Burglary Rates in each Area, by SES Group..... | 63 |
| 18 | Mean Rating of Likelihood of Future Victimization, by SES Group..... | 64 |
| 19 | Mean Number of Protective Actions, by SES Group..... | 65 |
| 20 | Percentage of Respondents who have Home Contents Insurance, by SES Group..... | 66 |
| 21 | Estimated Burglary Rates in each Area Compared to the Official Incidence..... | 67 |

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Recently "fear of crime" has emerged as a significant social issue (Toseland, 1982; Warr, 1990). Some writers suggest it has increased considerably faster than the actual crime rate (Garofalo & Laub, 1978; Liska, Lawrence & Sanchirico, 1982). Anxiety over becoming the victim of a crime is widespread. Estimates of the proportion of the population who experience "fear of crime" or crime related anxiety range from 40-50% both in the United States and in Canada (Gomme, 1988). Thus the consequences of crime go far beyond the physical and economic losses imposed by criminals. Indeed, many believe that fear of becoming the victim of a crime is a social problem as serious as that posed by the crime itself (Box, Hale & Andrews, 1988; Erskine, 1974; Gomme, 1986; Parker, 1988).

Definition of "Fear of Crime"

The whole subject of "fear of crime" is fraught with terminological and methodological inconsistencies, reducing the usefulness of many empirical findings. Much of the research on "fear of crime" is descriptive and distinctly atheoretical. Perhaps most significantly 'fear' is not defined in any consistent manner and has been conceptualised by any of a number of crime related and demographic variables. Warr (1984) has suggested that the term "fear of crime" is so carelessly used today that it ceases to have any clear meaning or use in research.

Research is equivocal as to whether crime related correlates of fear or demographic correlates of fear are more significant. Some studies favour crime related factors (Box et al., 1988; Miethe & Lee, 1984), whilst others have found demographic factors (Toseland, 1982) to be more significant.

When it comes to considering measures of "fear of crime" crime related predictors which have been studied include previous victimization (Block & Long, 1973; Brown & Harris, 1989; Skogan, 1987), indirect victimization (Gomme, 1986; Toseland, 1982), perception of vulnerability (Perloff, 1983; Perloff & Fetzer, 1986), the crime rate of the area (Clemente & Kleiman, 1977; Furstenburg, 1971; Jaycox, 1978; McPherson, 1978), the extent to which an individual takes precautions (Garofalo, 1981; Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983), the ability to recuperate from victimization (Wirtz & Harrell, 1987b) and the degree of worry or concern regarding crime (Giles-Sims, 1984; Miethe & Lee, 1984).

Demographic variables most consistently related to "fear of crime" are gender and age (Clemente & Kleiman, 1977; Yin, 1980). Socio-economic status is related to a lesser degree (Kleiman & David, 1973). Other demographic variables that have received attention both alone and in combination with other factors include race (Parker, 1988; Yin, 1980), educational level and marital status (Kemp, 1987; Parker, 1988), political orientation (Gomme, 1986; Kemp, 1987), health status (Giles-Sims, 1984), and a variety of community based determinants including community size (Skogan, 1987), contacts in the community, number of relatives and church attendance (Kleinman & David, 1973), familiarity with the neighbourhood and

knowledge of criminal activity (Baumer, 1978), neighbourhood cohesion, confidence in the police, levels of local incivility, vandalism and isolation (Box et al., 1988). Additionally alienation, life satisfaction (Giles-Sims, 1984), and perceived loss of control (Cohn, Kidder & Harvey, 1978) have been studied as possible determinants of "fear of crime".

Personal and Property Crimes

A considerable body of literature has focused on the effects of personal crime, particularly sexual and violent offenses (Becker, Abel & Skinner, 1979; Burgess & Holmstrom, 1979; Ellis, 1983; Koss, Woodruff & Koss, 1990; Sparks & Ogles, 1990; Riger, Gordon & LeBailly, 1978; Sales, Baum & Shore, 1984; Wirtz & Harrell, 1987a). Personal victimizations may indeed represent the types of imagined experiences that the general public fear most, but conceptualising crime as 'personal' fails to take account of the types of criminal victimization experiences that predominate by a factor as high as ten to one, that is, property crimes (Brown & Harris, 1989; Newhart-Smith & Hill, 1991).

Victims of property crime have received little attention (Garofalo, 1981a; Van der Wurff & Stringer, 1989), although researchers have indicated that such offences, as in particular, residential burglary, can have a serious psychological impact on the householder resulting in a great deal of "pain and suffering" for the victim (Clarke & Hope, 1984; Janoff-Bulman, 1985; Maguire, 1980). Newhart-Smith and Hill (1991) found that "fear of crime" at an individual level was related to property crime, not

personal crime - property victimizations may have been more salient owing to greater frequency.

Furthermore, research has not differentiated between different types of crime victims. Often all crimes have been simply included together (for example see Gomme, 1988) or crimes have been specifically labelled, such as "rape" or "sexual assault".

Generalisations about the totality of crimes clearly have little value (Forgas, 1980; Hough, 1985). Between the victims of rape and the victims of attempted or petty offences are numbers of victims of moderately serious crimes, who may be greatly affected by what they perceive as criminal violation. These forgotten victims have received little attention by both researchers and survey providers (Lurigio, 1987).

Treating crime as a unitary phenomenon has no doubt contributed to the inconsistencies in "fear of crime" research. There are most certainly similarities in the effects of all criminal violations, but there are also differences. Attempts have been made to separately analyse personal and property crime (Lagrange & Ferraro, 1989), but overall few attempts have been made to perform a comparative analysis of the different types of crime. For the reasons detailed above the present researcher has looked at the effects of a property crime, more specifically the effects of residential burglary, upon peoples "fear of crime".